

# **Design Research Report**

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## **Aims and Objectives**

My game, currently untitled, is an experimental philosophical game where players are tasked with cooking intangible emotions using entirely inedible, often nonsensical ingredients. Rather than following logical recipes or objective goals, players are encouraged to interpret symbolic prompts through freeform experimentation, transforming the kitchen into a metaphorical space from which meaning is extrapolated in a personalized manner.

At its impetus, this concept started with the mission statement of incentivizing modern audiences to embrace surrealist interpretations of art, and has now subtly shifted into focusing on inviting players to confront, understand, and express their emotions in a creative manner. Key to both of these aims for my game is the power of objects, and the meaning they may or may not hold; hence, the objectives for this research are to examine the following questions:

- How do players find meaning in things that aren't meant to mean anything, or, at least, not in any fixed way?
- How can games build emotional or narrative meaning solely through symbolic interaction?
- How can designers incentivize players to derive meaning from symbols without blatant context?
- How can games use objects as a canvas for the player to express and experience emergent narratives?
- To what extent does the meaning behind a symbol have to be inherently rational?

All of these objectives are ultimately rooted in the idea of semiotics, which in simplest terms, are the study of symbols and the way they're used and interpreted to create a response (Marcus, 2024). This will be the central idea that my research will tackle, and through it I hope to derive a relationship between context, symbol, and observer and how that relationship is used to derive and fluctuate meaning.

## Sources of Inspiration and Research

### Logical Depictions of Semiotics

- *Cooking Simulator*



A screenshot from the Steam version of the game *Cooking Simulator*. (Big Cheese Studio, 2019)

Cooking Simulator is the primary inspiration behind why my game exists in the manner that it does. I view this game as the most rudimentary form of semiotics, where players view objects they have a learned awareness of from real life similarity, and use those ingredients in a rational manner to prepare a tangible dish. In that way, cooking games can be viewed as a quintessential expression of symbology, and I wanted to use it as a framework to subvert the meanings that an object can have, and how that can change contextually and interpersonally.

- *Semiotics: The Basics* - Daniel Chandler

This book functions as my foundation for understanding semiotic theory. Chandler presents a clear breakdown of key concepts like signifiers, signifieds, denotation and connotation. It is meant to be an introduction to the rational means upon which the meaning of symbols is created, the way meaning is derived from them, and the means upon which those symbols can be iterated upon. (Chandler, 2007)

- *A Theory of Semiotics* - Umberto Eco

After using the prior book as a means to have a comprehensive understanding of the fundamentals of semiotics, this book by Umberto Eco is a more intricate and complex dissection of the topic, which further enriched the foundation present in Daniel Chandler's exploration of semiotics. Just like *Semiotics: The Basics*, this book is a logical and rational source on signs and symbology, which contrasts very effectively against the more abstract interpretation of it within my game, and the other sources present in this research. (Eco, 1976)

- *Semiotics in Film: Relationship Between Semiotics and Cinema*

This article approaches an analysis of semiotics from a very rational and logical angle. It posits that semiotics in cinema rely on signs and symbols being learned and recognisable by audiences in daily life, in order to evoke meaning and emotion from that familiarity. In particular, calling these signs “inherently learned” (Beverly Boy Productions, 2021), and that subconscious understanding of signs is a powerful tool for filmmakers. I found this article of interest because of how directly it presents the use of symbols and signs in art to be, an interpretation that I personally disagree with, yet see the value in. Hence, my aim with my research is to consider both logical and abstract depictions of semiotics.

*Abstract Depictions of Semiotics*

- *The Beginner’s Guide*



*A screenshot from the Steam version of the game The Beginner's Guide. (Wreden, 2015)*

My interest in The Beginner’s Guide for this research stems from its most prevailing symbolic motif, that being the lamppost. A majority of the games within this anthology end with this lamppost, usually it’s within an irrational context that a lamppost wouldn’t usually be. The narrator frames it as a symbol of commonality between all of the creator’s works, and that invites the player to think deeper on what this lamppost could possibly mean considering the context provided by the narrator, and the space that the object inhabits. While there is an added layer to this symbol revealed at the end of the game, for the sake of this research, the use of this symbol in its initial context is a compelling example of semiotics, a normally mundane symbol being given a completely different meaning due to its context.

- *Grapefruit - Yoko Ono*

Grapefruit is a conceptual art book by Yoko Ono, first self-published in 1964 in Tokyo, composed of short texts that function as poetic, minimal instructions for imagined or performative actions. These instructions are often absurd, paradoxical, or impossible. This is a more unconventional source for my research, but one that I found much value in, as the symbols within this text are entirely verbal, not visual. The instructions contain recognisable verbs and nouns, semiotics that are tangible and understandable in isolation, yet within the context of the book, are recontextualised in an irrational manner. The aim behind them is not to evoke action, but to evoke thought through a lack of action. (Ono, 2000)

- *Everything*



*Screenshot of the Steam version of Everything. (O'Reilly, 2017)*

Everything is an inherently philosophical and spiritual experience, using the entire spectrum of life to explore what it means to be alive. The game starts on earth, as you jump from species to species, however, you can continue to ascend and ascend, and what that leads you to is an alien planet. Within that alien planet, you can also jump from species to species, yet those species are entirely aesthetically alien to any symbols we can learn in our day to day life. The image above showcases a clump of spheres, spheres that are actually meant to be a species of bird. I found that to be an incredibly evocative and powerful use of semiotics.

- *The Treachery of Images - Rene Magritte*



*A scanned copy of René Magritte's The Treachery of Images (Magritte, 1929)*

This painting is a subversive take on the idea of semiotics. It presents an illustration of a pipe, with the text underneath translating to "this is not a pipe." The idea being that this is merely a visual representation of a pipe, a symbol and icon that we assign the function of smoking to, yet what we are looking at cannot perform that function despite its aesthetic similarity to that symbol. The abstraction of a symbol when taken out of the context of reality, and put within the context of art is an idea that greatly compels me in relation to my game, as that is essentially the essence of the use of semiotics within my game.

- *Composition VII* - Wassily Kandinsky



*A digital version of Wassily Kandinsky's surrealist painting, Composition VII. (Kandinsky, 1913)*

On a cursory glance, a painting that features an incomprehensible cacophony of shapes, colors, and pattern would seem to be at fundamental odds with the topic of semiotics. However, that is precisely the reason why I have taken an interest in it for this research. The idea of unconventional symbols in an unconventional context is quite meaningful for my game and its approach to semiotics, so this will stand as a valuable supplementary source. This piece is a revolutionary work in abstract surrealism, yet what I find especially striking can be found in a blog covering this painting, in which it states that it was the source of much frustration from observers, due to the lack of apparent understanding it evokes. The blog's defense and analysis of this piece lies entirely in the context of its creature, a context that the piece itself does not present and seemingly has no intention to present. (IdeelArt, 2018)

## Case Study

### *Mountain*

Mountain, developed by David O'Reilly in 2014, stands as a compelling case study for the exploration of semiotics within games, particularly in how it invites players to construct personal meaning from a game that offers little in terms of traditional mechanical or narrative linearity. In order to dissect Mountain within the study of semiotics, I will be primarily targeting my focus towards the role of context within the creation and understanding of meaning and symbols

Within the preface of *Semiotics: The Basics*, Daniel Chandler posits that the conventional meaning of symbols is drawn from referential contexts, context in this study referring to the instance that a symbol resides within (XIV). That convention is something that has to be collectively “learned” (28), and the subversion of that conventionality of meaning is where Mountain’s impact as a symbolic piece can be found.

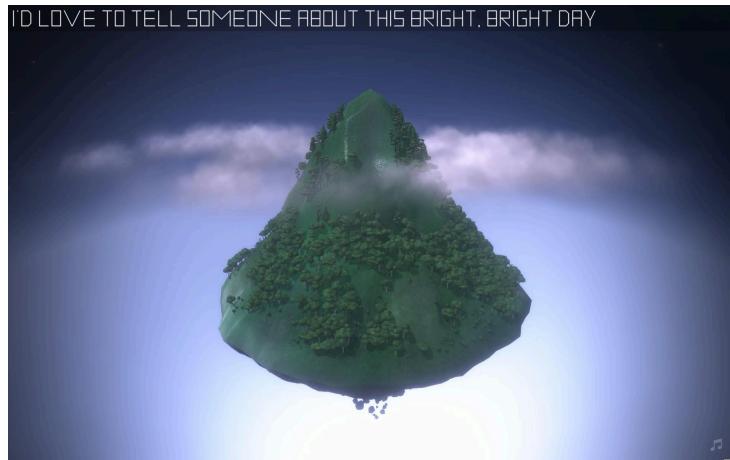


*Screenshot from KurtJMac from Youtube's Playthrough of the very start of Mountain (2014) (kurtjmac, 2014)*

Mountain begins with a blank canvas, a prompt on top of it, and the hint to “Draw Something.” The game begins by providing the player solely with a context, and providing them free means to assign a symbol to that context. When considering the aforementioned conventional meaning of symbols existing due to learned context, what does that say about this instance, where a player creates a completely unique symbol stemming from recognisable context? Steven Hanard’s paper, “*The Symbol of Grounding Problem*” begins with a connection very relevant to the study of games, which is that learned signs are a means of operant conditioning, shaped behavior based on learned experience. It uses that as a foundation to explore the idea of the symbology outside the bounds of learned recognition, asking the questions of: can inherently meaningless symbols become meaningful, and how can a symbol’s meaning be made intrinsic to the context it is in rather than the meaning we are conditioned to perceive? (Hanard, 1990).

Mountain propounds an iteration on both of those questions. On the topic of the first of those questions; within this opening moment, the game positions the player as a symbolic originator by allowing them free reign to symbolically express content and meaning that they’re given in a personalised manner. The resulting symbol emerges not from a shared lexicon or referent, but entirely from the player’s intuition, memories, aesthetic impulse, or any other possible origin. It is designed to encourage

the creation of a symbol that only truly has meaning to the person it originated from, conventionally meaningless semiotics, given personalised contextual meaning. This is an example of an “Empty Signifier,” in accordance to Daniel Chandler’s aforementioned book, a symbol defined by a vague, highly variable meaning that changes depending on the observer. (78) This symbolic grounding and empty signification leads into the second part of Mountain, and in turn the second of Hanard’s queries: how can a symbol’s meaning be made intrinsic to the context it is in, rather than the learned meaning we are conditioned to perceive?



*A screenshot from the Steam Version of Mountain (O'Reilly, 2014)*

Upon drawing symbols for 3 different randomized prompts in the game’s intro, Mountain then transitions to its second and most substantial part, that being the titular mountain itself. The game spawns in a mountain with seemingly personalised aesthetic flourishes that simply floats around in space. Through taking the symbol of a mountain out of its natural and grounded context, and putting in this new context, the Mountain begs to be dissected with an entirely unconventional meaning. It becomes an empty signifier, a canvas upon which players impose meaning onto.

As Umberto Eco states in *A Theory of Semiotics*, meaning in a social sense is defined by the connection of several relationships, the discomfort of the unknown is what leads us to connect meaning (22). It is in that way that Mountain prevails in its answers to Hanard’s posited queries about grounded symbology, the mountain, without context or learned function, gains meaning only through the player’s personal interpretation. It’s not a puzzle to solve, but a mirror to reflect individual thought.

## **Design Insight**

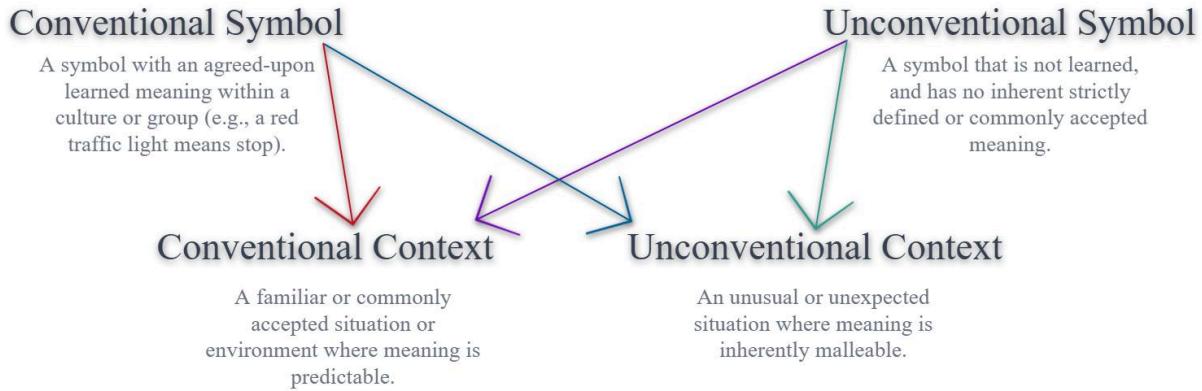
Upon considering my game idea, my research, and my case study altogether through the guise of semiotics, I came up with the following categorization of symbols that I found to be the most relevant:

- Conventional symbols in a conventional context
  - This refers to any learned symbols we can recognize in a context that retains their meaning, most obviously of which being the inspiration behind my game: Cooking Simulator. Which contains cooking ingredients in a cooking context, making every symbol instantly comprehensible.
- Conventional symbols in an unconventional context
  - This can be applied to Mountain, in the way it takes the recognisable conventional symbol of a mountain, and places it in an entirely unconventional context, turning it into an empty signifier upon which meaning can be interpreted from.
- Unconventional symbols in a conventional context
  - The example that I pulled from Everything, with the spheres that actually end up being birds is the perfect example of this, the symbol in isolation was too abstract to denote meaning from, yet classifying it as a bird within the context of an alien planet made it recognisable yet discomforting and uncanny. I believe this is the most effective means to create an alien yet immediately understood response, as can be exemplified in Everything.
- Unconventional symbols in an unconventional context
  - Composition VII by Wassily Kandinsky is a picturesque example of this, a work of art with no symbolic signifiers as to what it could possibly mean, and no context to aid that understanding: surrealism and abstraction in its purest form.

This breakdown was incredibly valuable in helping me rationalize my approach to semiotics within my game. It clarified the spectrum of symbolic interpretation I wanted to engage with and allowed me to intentionally position my design within the second and fourth categories: being both conventional and unconventional symbols placed within an unconventional context. By understanding how meaning is preserved, distorted, or entirely reconstructed across these categories due to my research sources and especially my case study of Mountain, I was able to lean into ambiguity and abstraction not as a weakness of communication, but as an invitation for player-driven meaning-making. This reframing has shaped both the mechanics and narrative goals of the project, guiding me to treat the unconventional surrealist kitchen not as a logical space, but as a symbolic one, where ingredients and interactions reflect inner states, not recipes.

## Design Framework

### Semiotics in Games: The Relationship Between Symbol and Context



#### Natural/Understandable

Meaning is clear and expected. Players immediately understand the symbol's mechanics and utility due to the manner in which it evokes univeral learned experience.

#### Alien/Understandable

The symbol is unfamiliar, but the context guides interpretation, for an intended meaning. However, the aesthetic unfamiliarity leads to an uncanny alien feeling.

#### Empty Signifier

The symbol is known, but the context voids or confuses its meaning. Empty signifiers are meant to elicit subjective and personalized meaning and interpretation.

#### Incomprehensible/Surreal

Both symbol and context are unfamiliar, creating disorientation. There is nothing that acts as a guide to craft meaning that is rooted in any semblance of rationality.

## **Critical Reflection**

Before engaging with this research, I was using symbols within my games unconsciously and more so used intuition to gauge what feels right. However, now that I have researched deeply on the correlation between symbols, context, conventionality, and audience, I can confidently state that my engagement with semiotics as a designer on an aesthetic, narrative and mechanical level has gotten significantly more learned. That correlation that was at the heart of this research was not one that I was provided directly by any of the sources. It was through engaging with different perspectives on what semiotics are, different definitions, and the ways a variety of works use symbols and signs to varying degrees, that I was naturally able to connect the framework that I crafted for my design. It is a framework that has provided me with a more intentioned approach to the concept of meaning in a context in which meaning is not concrete, as well as the personalised interpretative nature of objects within interactive space; all of which lies at the core of my game's design.

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